

From the Revolutionary War to the 1790s: the Creek Nation in the Southern Gulf Region



A map of indigenous nations before the 'Trail of Tears' [courtesy of Pinterest](#).

Where we last left off, [I wrote](#) about how Gaither, a veteran of the Maryland 400, had served “seven years on the Georgian frontier, and two years in the Mississippi Territory as a U.S. Army officer” in which he was involved in numerous incidents on the frontier of Georgia, with disputes between the Creek Nation (Muskogee), other indigenous nations, and Georgian inhabitants. Specifically I told the stories of an incident in 1793 at the fork of the Tallahatchie River, reports of robbery and murder of two Whites on the St. Mary’s River later that year and anger among the Creek Nation after [James Seagrove](#), US Ambassador to the Creek Nation, called for retribution. Beyond this, I told the story of Major General Elijah Clarke’s failed expedition to invade Spanish territory in Louisiana in mid-1794, alarming even George Washington’s

government, and Gaither at the end of his life, serving on the Mississippi River, and dying in 1811, at age 61 on a Washington D.C. plantation. A relatively new book by Early American/"North American borderlands" historian [Kathleen DuVal](#) titled [*Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*](#) sheds light on the Creek Nation, which is even reviewed [positively in the New York Times](#) by Woody Holton and the post-war environment on the new frontier.

Before the revolutionary war, the Creek, [Chickasaw](#), and [Choctaw](#) Nations spread from the Gulf Coast into the interior of the North American continent. [1] While these nations dominated the Southern Gulf (of Mexico) Coast region, the Choctaws likely had the biggest population, numbering, likely, twenty thousand by the early 1700s, in contrast to the five thousand Chickasaw and ten thousand Creek at the same time. [2] By the 1770s, Payamataha, chief of the Chickasaw, had made peace with the Choctaws, [Cherokees](#), [Catawbas](#), Creeks, and [Quapaws](#), other nearby indigenous nations, while Creek-Chickasaw peace, starting in 1760s, continued to flourish. [3] As for the Creeks, the focus of this story, they had a unique form of government. Living in the river valleys in a region that would become the present-day states of Alabama and Georgia, the Creeks, divided into the Lower Creeks and Upper Creeks comprised a loose confederation of sixty towns which had their own farms and lesser towns in their jurisdiction, with limited consultation on foreign policy and defense. [4] While this meant that each town or clan had the decision to go to war, engage in diplomacy, or create new towns, with a broad spread of governance, most of those in the towns spoke "related languages" and had "similar cultural practices and beliefs" to fellow members of the society. [5]

One man, named [Alexander McGillivray](#), tried to change this. McGillivray, born into a matrilineal Creek society, with his mother, Sehoy Marchand, and maternal uncle, Red Shoes, was multi-racial because his father was a Scottish highlander and trader named [Lachlan McGillivray](#). [6] He soon tried to gain a significant role in the world of Creek politics and society. However, he had trouble persuading the Creek people to succeed against the British not only because "no one could dictate foreign policy to even one Creek town or clan, much less the loose Creek Confederacy" but he was not a Creek headman and proven warrior. [7] Additionally, the British, seemed be fighting against the Continental Army and pro-revolutionary individuals, but not against settlers, leading certain US individuals to try and sway the Creeks, complicating McGillivray's attempts at diplomacy and persuasion of the Creek people. Apart from this changing aim, the Creek-British alliance seemed to go forward despite failed efforts at British-indigenous coordination, especially in 1778, leading to tension among the indigenous nations such as the Creeks and Chickasaws who fought alongside the British. [8] Additionally, the minds of the Creek people were taken off the war for a number of reasons. For one, the spread of smallpox across the continent limited the ability of the Creeks to contribute especially since they quarantined fellow indigenous (and British) towns infected by smallpox, and the involvement of the French and Spanish in the revolutionary war led to less inclination to be involved in an inter-empire conflict. [9]

By 1781, as the siege of Pensacola, then a town within colonial British Florida, seemed imminent, with the approach of a Spanish fleet, people's hopes were scattered, depending on the groups of people affected. For McGillivray, who "hoped for personal glory and Creek victory," he had trouble getting the Creeks to fight the Spaniards but succeeded by stressing stressed

Creek interests in the war and “opportunities for glory on the Gulf coast.” [10] Not everyone was convinced, however, as some Creeks went to the Spanish as a show of strength and attempt an alliance, but this failed not only because of the unification on foreign policy, like the Chickasaws, and because the two parties (Spanish and Creek) could not come to an agreement. [11] In a united front, January 8, 1781, Maryland and Pennsylvania loyalists fought alongside hundreds of Lower Creeks and Choctaws on an attack on a Spanish post at the “Village, which was on the other side of bay from Mobile. [12] In the attack, ending in a clear Spanish victory, Daniel Higgins of Maryland Loyalist Regiment, could have been among those who fought, along with many other loyalists from Maryland and Pennsylvania. [13] There were two other complicating factors. For one, even though about 1,700 soldiers under the command of General John Campbell, who had been in British West Florida since 1778, the city’s defense depended on warriors from the Chickasaw, Creek, and Choctaw nations since reinforcements had not arrived. [14] The other factor was that many Creeks were tired of the British treating them poorly, with some questioning McGillivray’s motives, since he was paid as a British agent, but he was successful yet again in countering them by saying that “cultivating interdependence with the British would facilitate Creek protection of their eastern border, where the British were fighting the Creeks’ most hated enemies, Georgians and Virginians” as DuVal notes. [15]

On May 8, the Spanish, helped by the French, were victorious in their siege, as the city of Pensacola surrendered. This meant that “the British had lost a colony that had not rebelled” and it would lead to a British decision to “recognize American independence before things got any worse.” [16] As Ray Raphael has pointed out, even after the Battle of Yorktown, resulting in the British surrender of Lord Cornwallis’s almost 7,000 troops, on October 17, the war was far from over despite what “conventional wisdom” says. Not only was King George III not ready to capitulate, but Washington was worried of future British advances, and peace was not even proposed by British military commanders until August 1782, with a preliminary peace treaty signed on November 30 of the same year. [17] Compounding this was a total of 47,000 British soldiers stationed in New York, Canada, South Carolina, Georgia, and the West Indies, “four times as many as those serving in the Continental Army.” [18] It is worth also noting that Washington was worried about a separate peace treaty between British and France, dooming the colonies, that over 300 revolutionary soldiers dying after Yorktown, the global nature of the American Revolutionary War, the “strategic retreat” rather than surrender by the British, which tells more of the story than acting like the battle at Yorktown was the end of the war. [19]

For the Creeks, the war hadn’t ended. As the Creeks left Pensacola before Spanish victory, they instructed [Alexander Cameron](#) to describe Creek commitment and bravery during the siege, especially the “details of Creek and Choctaw participation,” in a letter to the British in Georgia. [20] Apart from this, the Creeks and their allies fought even harder. Hundreds of Continental soldiers were killed until the final peace agreement in 1783 and the fight against US settlers moving westward intensified as the British were pulling out of their colonies. [21] While the British, Spanish, French, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, had seemed like bigger players in the war in the Southern Gulf region than the revolutionaries/“rebels,” the postwar arrangement would change all that. [22]

The [Treaty of Paris](#), actually negotiated, in part, in the Versailles Palace, was signed by the US and Britain, with France and Spain begrudgingly accepting it. Angriest of all were the Creeks,

Chickasaws, and Cherokees. In a letter to the Spanish King, these indigenous chiefs, brought together by McGillivray, said that the Treaty was not valid. They argued that the British ceded land they never possessed and that the Creek, Chickasaw, and Cherokee were nations of indigenous people who had independence and natural rights. [23] To complete this insult, the US government under the [Articles of Confederation](#), made a broad assertion. They declared that indigenous nations between the Appalachians and Mississippi were not sovereign nations but aggressors in the war. [24] This denied “independent sovereignty” of indigenous nations, which had been accepted by the British and Spanish in their negotiations with such nations, especially during the Revolutionary War.

In the years after the war, there were a number of changes. For one, McGillivray went back to the town his mother was living, staying there with his family as his British connections had become irrelevant. [25] Around the same time, Hoboithle Miko, also called the Tame King, Tallassee King, and Halfway-House King, the latter which recognized his role in negotiating good terms for those on both sides, of Great Tallassee, an Upper Creek town, and Niko Miko of Cussita, a Lower Creek town, led the negotiations with North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia since the British gave St. Augustine to the Spanish, along with broadly removing themselves from the region. [26] In terms of diplomacy, McGillivray led the way, helping push forward an alliance and trade with the Spanish, at a time that large numbers of Americans settling in lands claimed by Spanish and indigenous people. [27] The Creeks also experienced the unfriendly nature of the new United States firsthand. When Hoboithle Miko and Niko Miko attended a meeting of the Georgia legislature, in 1783, to try to maintain good relations with the United States, a treaty was quickly negotiated. [28] While Georgians thought it was valid, Creeks from only a few towns out of the sixty were there, meaning that it held no weight, but the Georgians did not realize this, possibly because of their ignorance of Creek customs, leading to tension. On the same token, while the idea of “advantageous independence,” which DuVal defines as people trying to “establish a balance in which they might have more control over dependent relationships,” expressed itself most strongly in the postwar period, just like during the war, a planter culture developed. [29] This culture, in which Creeks were slaveowners, created a disparity in the Creek Nation which hadn’t been seen before despite its existence in the nation for many years before.

In the following years, McGillivray tried to steer the Creek Nation in a more nationalist direction. First off, an alliance between the Creek and Spanish recognized sovereignty on both sides and “mutually beneficial trade,” giving the Creeks a “European ally.” [30] Secondly, McGillivray tried to centralize the foreign policy of the Creek Nation, recognizing that it would be more effective if this was implemented in “conjunction with other southeastern nations and even Indians to the north,” trying to create a [Southern Confederacy](#), even as this proved exceedingly difficult. [31] Thirdly, McGillivray presented to the world, but especially to the Europeans and Americans, a strong nationalist statement. While he didn’t want the Creek Nation to become a U.S. state, he did develop “a language of independent nationhood that carried particular weight with late-eighteenth century Europeans and Americans” with his explicit claims that the Creeks governed their “own independent nation.” [32] This went beyond the arrangement in the past as issues of Creek governance were debated internally instead of projected to other governments.

As Western expansion continued, Creeks began to be nervous. With Georgians encroaching on Creek hunting lands, and they were harder to remove, the Creek National Council took up arms in their defense, along with beginning to engage in small-scale raids into Georgia starting in 1785. [33] Not only did this lead to tension, but the Georgians seemed aloof by the attacks, not understanding their role and they attempted to negotiate. Adding to this was the complications that Spain faced in white US settlers entering disputed lands in Creek Country since it was not technically Spanish land, and Georgians had major claims, even as they secretly funded the actions of the Creeks. [34]

Tension between the Spanish and Creek Nation began to grow. When the Spanish welcomed immigration from the newly created United States of America, with the Creeks seeing no value in this. [35] McGillivray was hurt by these developments as he worked on gaining connections in the United States, gaining a truce with Georgia, along with other diplomacy to force the hand of Spain. Due to these strained relations, the Creeks were glad to hear that the British were involved in the region again. As a result, they tried to gain British connections, with supplies to the Creek nation, but this faltered due to the false promises by [William Augustus Bowles](#), a former member of the Maryland Loyalist Regiment. [36] By 1788, the situation had changed as the Spanish had reversed their previous decision. They had begun to supply the Creeks with weapons. They sent weapons, which helped them wage “wars against the United States through the War of 1812 and beyond.” [37] It is worth noting that the Creek Nation was by no stretch a colony of the Spanish or the British, but engaged in their own independent foreign policy, like the other indigenous nations at the time.

By the 1790s, McGillivray’s influence in the Creek Nation seemed to be waning. While the Creeks continued truce with US [38], until a new government was inaugurated in 1791 with the end of ratification, McGillivray signed a Congressional treaty. The document set the border between the Creek Nation and Georgia at the Oconee River which many Creeks thought was too much of a compromise, as did Georgians about the terms put forward by the administration of George Washington. [39] There was additional tension. In 1791, a Creek and Cherokee delegation to London said that the Creeks and Cherokees were united into one with the Chickasaws and Choctaws also swayed by the Council’s measures. [40] However, the Choctaws and Chickasaws did not agree, leading to increased friction among the indigenous nations. On February 17, 1793, he died in Pensacola, with his first and second wives mourning him, and his plantations distributed among his children. [41]

DuVal’s book, in terms of historical narrative, ends there, with some exceptions. She notes that by 1814, few Creeks came to defend Pensacola because “a few months earlier Jackson’s forces had fought alongside one Creek faction to defeat another in a disastrous civil war.” [42] She also adds that in 1834, which may have seemed unthinkable in 1793, the US “forcibly removed most Creeks across the Mississippi” with the Chickasaws only held out a few years longer. [43] Near the end, she says that the remove of Creeks and Chickasaws from their homelands “in the 1830s took their county but not their nationhood” but that Native American sovereignty has had a resurgence in recent years. [44]

Some readers may be wondering how this all ties to Henry Chew Gaither, a revolutionary war veteran and Marylander who was a major of the First Regiment of the U.S. Army from 1791 to

1792 and Lieutenant Colonel Commandant of the Third Sub-Legion from 1793 to 1802. The truth is that he likely never met McGillivray since he died in the sixth month of Gaither's deployment. Even so, the history of this article is directly relevant to the experience of Gaither while spent time on the Georgian frontier, until he went to [Fort Adams](#), which sat alongside the Mississippi River in 1800, staying until 1802, when he finally retired from the military for good. In the end, even though Gaither is not part of this story, the connections to the Maryland Loyalist Regiment and expansion of the history of the Southern Gulf Region makes DuVal's book valuable for understanding the Early American period while informing the happenings of the present.

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Notes

[1] Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015), xvii.

[2] Ibid, 9, 13.

[3] Ibid, 17, 19.

[4] Ibid, xviii, xxii, 9, 25-26. The Upper Creeks lived "along the Alabama, Coosa, and Tallapoosa rivers in present-day Alabama" and the Lower Creeks near "the Chattahoochee River, the present-day border between Alabama and Georgia" as DuVal notes.

[5] Ibid, 25-27.

[6] Ibid, xviii, 24-25.

[7] Ibid, 77-81.

[8] Ibid, 85-87, 99, 115.

[9] Ibid, 165-166, 176.

[10] Ibid, xxv-xxvi, 177-178.

[11] Ibid, 181, 185-186. DuVal writes that among the Choctaws there was broad disagreement with some joining the Spanish and others the British.

[12] Ibid, 167, 182.

[13] Higgins was related to Peter Higgins of the Fourth Independent Company, which had [Archibald Anderson](#) as its First Lieutenant and [James Hindman](#) as its Captain. While it is

possible that [Barnet Turner](#), a veteran of the Maryland 400, was part of the Maryland Loyalist Regiment, he had deserted in 1778, three years before the fighting near Pensacola. Looking this up more in-depth, the Maryland Historical Society seems to have the muster rolls of the Maryland Loyalist Regiment in [1782](#), the Canadian Archives [seems to have some records](#), there's a 1778 [Orderly Book](#) of the Maryland Loyalists (along with other Ancestry databases [here](#) and [here](#)), relevant documents on the regiment transcribed [here](#), [this muster list](#), parts of [this book](#), this [orderly book](#), bits and pieces noted [here](#), some results in the [Journal of the American Revolution](#), and [so on](#).

[14] Ibid, 194, 196, 205; George C. Osborn, "[Major-General John Campbell in British West Florida](#)," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 318, 332, 339.

[15] Ibid, 206-208.

[16] Ibid, 218.

[17] Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths: Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 211-214.

[18] Ibid, 214.

[19] Ibid, 215-225.

[20] DuVal, 217.

[21] Ibid, 228-229.

[22] Ibid, 128.

[23] Ibid, 236.

[24] Ibid, 236-237.

[25] Ibid, 246-247.

[26] Ibid, 247, 251.

[27] Ibid, xv, 248.

[28] Ibid, 250-253.

[29] Ibid, xxi, 249.

[30] Ibid, 257-258, 260.

[31] Ibid, 295-296.

[32] Ibid, 254-255.

[33] Ibid, 298-301.

[34] Ibid, 310-311.

[35] Ibid, 323, 326-327.

[36] Ibid, 327-329.

[37] Ibid, 341.

[38] Ibid, 332.

[39] Ibid, 342.

[40] Ibid, 304.

[41] Ibid, 343.

[42] Ibid, 340.

[43] Ibid, 343-344.

[44] Ibid, 350.